

Fit for life: *Staying active is best remedy for aging*

By Nicole Cloutier

Temperatures are cooling and the sky is getting dark earlier. As winter nears, many of us may tend to slow down our level of physical activity and get less exercise than we did during the warmer months. But maybe a quick glance at what some of our older peers are up to will inspire you to keep the spring in your step and do the daily workout you always intended to do.

Take for instance Anne Bush Brenton. A JSC program analyst for more than 32 years, Brenton is now retired but still works out at the Gilruth Center three times a week.

"It's just amazing how good you feel afterward," says Brenton.

NASA JSC Photo
S99-11666
by James Blair

"Getting up and getting started is tough, but I just make it a point to do it and not let it slip by."

Pretty impressive for someone in the 65 and up group, doing more than many of us in the 50 and below age bracket. But she's not alone. Our campus is filled with ambitious seniors that continue, or even in some cases, increase their fitness regimen as they grow older.

Stanley Blackmer, also a regular at Gilruth and part time payload avionics engineer, uses the stationary bicycle and other workout equipment five times a week. Blackmer started the fitness program when he was 50 years old.

"It's pretty obvious to me that staying active allows you to delay the aging process, which is inevitable," said Blackmer. "You can always find an excuse not to exercise if you want one. The trick is to get started and make it a routine."

Attitude can make the difference for anyone when it comes to getting out of the chair and into the gym.

Jeff Fox sees that first hand. His dad, NBL Manned Test Support Group Supervisor Mike Fox, has always been involved in sports.

"It's all about attitude," says Jeff Fox, who is on a recreational softball team with his father. "If you think it's going to be hard,

then it will be hard. We have 20-, 30-, 40- and 50-year-olds on our team and no one can complain because what can they complain about? They have a 66-year-old on their team who's got aches and pains but he's not quitting."

A retired master chief hospital corpsman from the U.S. Navy, the senior Fox

has excelled at most sports he's tried, and the list is long. Aside from being a Navy diver, he played on all-Navy softball and bowling teams and even had a stint on the pro-boxing circuit after winning the welterweight all-Navy title. Other hobbies included golf, hockey, sky diving, and jogging, not to mention coaching dozens of Little League teams and a youth bowling league.

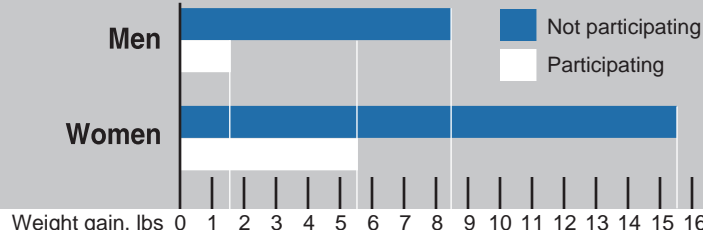
Contrary to what he says, his activities have only slowed slightly. He's still on the softball team, but has added roller-blading, white-water rafting, and bodysurfing at Galveston to his roster. Additionally, he walks three miles each night, uses the PowerRider regularly and is planning his first snow ski trip for this winter.

"Age is catching up with me but I'm trying to outrun it," says Fox. "But what I value most from having stayed in shape is that I am able to do active things with my kids at this age. We all know people

who say, 'Oh, I wish I had done this or that' – I tell myself, 'I am going to do this.' You can't stop [working out] – You'll never get back to the condition you're in now."

He makes a good point. According to Dr. Larry Wier, JSC's director of health-related fitness, the average age at time of death is about 75. If a person lives to age 62, he or she has better than 50 - 50 odds of living to age 80, but the remaining 12 years of life are not commonly characterized by good health. However, Wier points out, many senior citizens maintain a youthful lifestyle and retain their independence. Maintaining a fitness regimen helps mitigate the negative effects of aging.

Impact of fitness on weight gain



This chart reflects the mean weight gain after ten years of NASA/JSC employees not involved in the JSC Fitness Program vs. those who participate in the program.

"There's no doubt there is a physiological effect to aging," said Wier, who has authored several studies on the impact of regular fitness activities on people as they grow older. "But an active lifestyle helps retain your youth."

JSC's Health and Fitness Program includes an initial medical screening and individualized 3-day a week fitness program. The program lasts three months, but encourages quarterly follow-ups.

Wier stresses the importance of taking care of your body and incorporating some level of exercise into your lifestyle, even if you've had heart problems, which scares a lot of people from the gym.

"I get lots of calls from people after they've had surgery, wondering if it's safe," said Wier. "You definitely can be active despite heart disease. Walking and

jogging programs have the most success."

The most important thing anyone should keep in mind when starting a fitness program is to ease into it. "Don't try to be an Olympian the first week," advises Wier. He recommends starting out slowly and then building up. ■

Maintaining an active lifestyle as you mature can help ensure that you can keep up with your kids, as shown by rollerbladers Mike Fox, left, and his son Jeff.

Although retired, Anne Bush Brenton continues to visit the Gilruth Center regularly.



NASA JSC Photo S99-06132 by James Blair

People interested in more information about the Health-Related Fitness Course should call Wier at x30301.

Tips for just starting out...

Walking: Start out by walking four times a week for 30 minutes, adding three minutes each week with the goal of walking five or six times a week for 45 minutes to an hour each time.

Jogging: Start out with a light jog for 15 minutes, then add three minutes each week until you are running four or five times a week for 35 to 40 minutes. Remember to completely stretch out before and AFTER each activity.

Wier has helped hundreds of people incorporate fitness into their lives and needs little more proof of the positive impact it can have on your quality of life.

"I have some patients maybe 65 or 70 years old exercising regularly in our facility; some have even hiked the Appalachian Trail," said Wier. "The big difference between these people and those of the same age who are immobilized by conditions such as heart attack or stroke, is their level of habitual activity. The key to staying fit for a lifetime is staying active."

Activity is the name of the game but once you start, there's nothing you can't do. Remember Anne Brenton. Bringing down high blood pressure is what prompted her to start getting into better shape, but now she's got higher goals, including working on her pilot's license. And Stanley Blackmer? He's still racing around on his 30-foot sailboat while many of his 60-year-old friends are winded before reaching the dock. It's never to late – so start with a stretch and take the next step towards getting fit.